DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 078 761 HE 004 338

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TITLE An Analysis of the Colorado College Plan.
INSTITUTION Toledo Univ., Ohio. Center for the Study of Higher Education.
PUB DATE Mar 73
NOTE 4p.
JOURNAL CIT Critique; v5 n2 p1-4 Mar1973

EDRS PRICE MF-$0.65 HC-$3.29
DESCRIPTORS *Curriculum Design; *Educational Innovation; Educational Programs; *Higher Education; Program Length; *Schedule Modules; *Scheduling
IDENTIFIERS *Colorado College

ABSTRACT

The Colorado College Plan was designed to reconstitute the academic calendar so that student and faculty time would be used more productively. Courses are offered one at a time, rather than simultaneously, in nine blocks, each 3 1/2 weeks in length. The fall semester encompasses four of these blocks and the spring semester contains five. Each block is separated by a 4 1/2 day break beginning on Wednesday noon and ending the following Monday. Preliminary assessments of the plan are positive. (MJM)

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CRITIQUE

A Quarterly Memorandum

EDITORIAL OPINION

Now and then, over the past few years, CRITIQUE has attempted to bring to the attention of its readers examples of private liberal arts colleges where departures are being made from the traditions of the past. This issue presents such an example from the thoughts of George A. Drake, the Dean of Colorado College, on the topic of the "Colorado College Plan."

The plan itself is a good illustration of what might occur when a college faculty and student body take a careful and serious look at themselves. Although the program has not been in effect long enough for much in-depth assessment, the Dean does describe the data available at the present time.

The implication from the plan for liberal education elsewhere is also intriguing: how can differential scheduling, in a more traditional college, provide for both "block scheduling" of intensive courses, and more "periodic scheduling" of classes over longer terms, so that the choice might be made on the basis of the nature of the subject itself? When we can begin to do this successfully we will have taken a step forward toward breaking the locked-in style of curricula that forces the subject and the student to conform to an arbitrary calendar system.

WFH

AN ANALYSIS OF THE COLORADO COLLEGE PLAN

George A. Drake*

In September, 1970, after two years of planning, a new academic structure was inaugurated at Colorado College. The objective was to reconstitute the academic calendar so that student and faculty time would be used more productively. The Colorado College Plan embodies a simple structural change, but this change, however simple, has enormous impact on the academic life of the College. The plan "tips" ninety degrees the normal horizontal pattern of simultaneous courses offered throughout the semester or quarter, creating a vertical course pattern. Courses are offered one at a time, rather than simultaneously, in nine blocks, each three and one half weeks in length. The fall semester encompasses four of these blocks and the spring semester contains five. Each block is separated by a four and one half day break beginning on Wednesday noon and ending the following Monday. During these intervals, faculty finish their grading and make last minute preparation for the next course while students are able to enjoy a brief respite from relatively intense academic pressures.

There are some two-block (seven weeks) courses but the preponderance are offered for a single block. Students take only one course and faculty teach but one during each of these blocks (with one exception to be noted later). Thus there is a one-to-one correlation between the course load of students and the teaching load of faculty. In this way the effective faculty-student ratio has been reduced so that average class size has been lowered from nineteen to fifteen, and the upper limit in all courses is held at twenty-five.

The essential feature of the Colorado College Plan, the block course of three and one half of seven weeks, represents *the* formal academic commitment both for students and faculty. Though constraints are imposed by relatively short course length, there is almost complete internal freedom. Since students and faculty are involved in only one course, there are no schedule conflicts and the day

*Dean of Colorado College

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or week can be structured as seems most appropriate to the purposes of the course. On some days the entire class may meet for two or three hours, or the class might not meet at all because students will have work which best can be accomplished by solitary study. Small groups or individuals may have tutorials or conferences with the professor, or the entire class may move off campus for periods of a single day up to the entire three and one half weeks. The ability to go off campus whenever necessary has been of particular benefit to the anthropology, biology, geology, language, political science and sociology departments. Some offerings in each of these departments have become almost exclusively field oriented.

The important fact to bear in mind is that there is nearly complete flexibility of scheduling. Aside from a request that formal instruction skirt the afternoon hours from three o'clock until dinner, reserved for extracurricular activities, the College imposes no restraints; nor does it make any attempt to monitor instructional scheduling, except for purposes of evaluation. Both theory and practice are that, with a well-qualified and motivated faculty and student body, the institution should impose as few restraints as possible on instruction. Freedom is granted to challenge students and faculty to make the best possible use of their time.

Another benefit of block scheduling is the use that can be made of laboratories and studios throughout the day. With traditional calendars these facilities often stand idle during the morning hours when students are "in class." With single course obligations under the Colorado College Plan, students are free to work in the laboratory or studio throughout the day.

Each course has its own room available at all times for classes and study. This arrangement, desirable and even necessary to scheduling flexibility, stretches college facilities to their limits. About twenty per cent more classroom space is required. As a result, courses meet in dormitory and fraternity lounges as well as in the classroom buildings. Three semesters' experience with the plan makes it apparent that rearrangement of existing space as well as additional courseroom facilities will be required.

One of the most welcome advantages of the block system is the relative ease with which visiting faculty can be accommodated. Frequently there are courses which best can be taught by someone who is not a professional academician. Photography courses taught by two prominent local photographers and a course on mysticism taught by a Cistercian monk come readily to mind. It also has proved to be relatively easy to lure outstanding scholars such as Carl Friedrich, William Arrowsmith and Henry Wells to spend a month in Colorado Springs teaching a scheduled course and offering lectures and seminars.

Though almost all courses are offered according to the block format, there is an alternative arrangement. During the final three blocks of the fall semester and the first three in the spring are "extended half courses." Students may enroll for two half courses each, either two or three blocks in length (seven or ten and one-half weeks). Students normally take two such courses simultaneously, and faculty who teach under this format normally are responsible for two as well. Usually subjects which require a longer absorption time and hence are inappropriate for the intensive approach of block courses, are offered as extended half courses.

Subjects such as applied music, dance and physical education are assigned to a category labeled "adjunct courses." These yield fractional credit and may be taken concurrently with a block course—with the understanding that scheduling in the block course takes precedence.

The Colorado College Plan has won wide acceptance among both students and faculty. An evaluation survey conducted late in the spring semester of the inaugural year, and substantiated by a similar survey in the second year, revealed that ninety per cent of the students and seventy-three per cent of the faculty preferred the new structure to the old. The figure for the faculty is particularly interesting in comparison with the fifty-eight per cent majority which voted to adopt the new plan in the fall of 1969.

Interesting patterns have emerged which may provide more concrete indices' than do surveys of opinion. Normal class attendance has risen from about eighty-five per cent to over ninety-five per cent without any change in the regulations which leave attendance almost entirely to student discretion. Suspensions for academic failure dropped from fifty-eight in 1969-70 to fourteen in 1970-71, the first year of the new plan and twelve in 1971-72. Enrollments in natural science courses have risen by thirty-five per cent under the Colorado

College Plan. Interdisciplinary courses are fostered by the plan, and the number has risen sharply during the past two years. In addition, the faculty is discovering the benefits of coordinated scheduling as joint activities easily are managed in courses which meet during the same block. Faculty report that they spend more hours with students, not necessarily in formal classes but in less formal contact with small groups and individuals. There is clear indication from most faculty that teaching has become more challenging, more time-consuming —and more rewarding.

On balance, preliminary assessments of the Colorado College Plan are quite positive. Some might argue that this success is the result of simplified student academic commitments. Where a student had conflicting responsibilities for four or five courses, he now is responsible for but one per block. Assignments are frequent but steady throughout the year without the usual crises generated by mid-term examinations and the confluence of term papers; and there is no final examination period at the end of the semester. The "smoothing out" of academic work loads is reflected in library use which generally has increased and most dramatically has become more regular. In place of the end of semester rush, use is heavy from the second day of the semester and remains constant throughout.

Important as these considerations may be, many would not regard them as the primary justification for the Colorado College Plan. Of greater significance is the fact that students have become more actively involved in their own education.

The traditional arrangement of classes meeting on alternate days for fifty minutes encourages faculty to pursue their natural inclination to lecture. Lectures, or lecture/discussions, seem to be the ready response to this form of scheduling, particularly if the class contains twenty or more students. Though an effective teaching technique, particularly if transmission of factual knowledge is the primary goal, lecturing is not the only nor necessarily the most effective pedagogical tool. There is one notable defect: it encourages student passivity. The lecturer is active, but students too often are inert.

One of the few principles which educators seem to agree upon is that learning increases in proportion to the learner's active involvement in the educational process. Thus, if a curriculum is changed to encourage more active involvement of students, there should be palpable educational improvement. Colorado College believes that it has made such a change.

Teaching either exclusively or primarily by lecturing is difficult in the intensive block course. To lecture with coverage similar to the semester course would require at least two to three hours per day. Few faculty possess the necessary stamina, and almost no students are willing to listen attentively for that length of time. Thus the new format encourages — almost demands — new approaches. Seminars, discussions, tutorials, field trips, individual and group directed study, problem sessions, drama, and, of course, laboratories and studios are some of the techniques which effectively can be used in intensive courses. All normally demand greater activity from the student than does the lecture. Thus, through structural change, more varied and effective pedagogy is encouraged. Just as faculty self-interest dictates reliance on lectures in the traditional academic framework, so self-interest invites faculty to rely more heavily on student initiative under the Colorado College Plan. The feeling is that self-interest and good pedagogy now lie closer together.

Any educational reform probably will be a balance of gains and losses, hopefully the gains outweighing the losses. The preliminary conclusion at Colorado College is that the single course system makes it somewhat more difficult to impart comprehensive factual knowledge. Thus, insofar as a good education consists of dissemination of knowledge, Colorado College may have lost ground. However, if major components of a high quality liberal education are the infusion of young minds with a desire to learn, and the provision of critical tools such as logical and penetrating thought, spoken and written clarity and style, appropriate methodologies, and the knowledge of "where to look," Colorado College almost certainly has made impressive advances. Students are more eager to learn and their intellectual sophistication is greater. In the opinion of most, these gains far outweigh the losses, and for that reason we have decided to retain and hopefully refine the new plan in the years immediately ahead.

Grant to Study Off Campus Education, International and Domestic

The Center's Director, Dr. W. Frank Hull IV, has been awarded a $43,000 research grant for the first phase of a project aimed at developing instrumentation for the assessment of the educational values of academic programs offered by American colleges and universities off-campus, both international and domestic. Dr. Leo D. Leonard and Dr. Stephen Jurs, both of The University of Toledo, complete the project's team. The project, "The American Undergraduate, Off-Campus and Overseas: A Study of the Educational Validity of Such Programs," has been funded by the U.S. Office of Education's Institute of International Studies.

The current phase of the project, which began May 15, 1972, involves the development of instrumentation for measuring the educational effectiveness of undergraduate overseas study programs (cognitive and affective) and for comparing them with college programs conducted off-campus but within the United States, and with the students who remain on the home campus during their four year programs. Part of the present phase of study will involve intensive interviewing of American students and foreign personnel enrolled in overseas programs being conducted at Bogota, Columbia; Cuernavaca, Mexico; and Tokyo, Japan. If the present efforts prove successful, the project will be broadened and extend through 1984 and expanded to include American undergraduate students studying throughout the United States and in Europe, Africa, the Middle East, Asia, and elsewhere.

The project is being conducted in cooperation with The Great Lakes Colleges Association of Ann Arbor, Michigan, and The Regional Council on International Education of Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania.

One reviewer's comment

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CRITIQUE is published quarterly by The Center for the Study of Higher Education, The University of Toledo. The focus of the quarterly is on articles of medium length (around thirteen pages, double spaced) relating directly to concerns of interest to college and university faculty and administrators. Manuscripts focusing on practical issues within contemporary higher education are generally given priority over theoretical pieces. Such manuscripts may or may not be research oriented. Manuscripts to be considered for publication should be submitted in duplicate to the editor.

Editor: W. Frank Hull IV, Director.

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Volume V, Number 2, March, 1973.

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